

**Ron Bright is delighted that *Rear Window* is again on release. After all, it's his favourite film**

**U**ntil very recently, I had not seen *Rear Window* for nearly thirty years. It is a film I'd always wanted to see again, and over the intervening time I often found my mind straying towards it. This is the sign of a good film. Anything that can make such an impression on its audience must have a timeless quality not found in most movies, many of which are dim and ghostly memories a week after viewing.

I have now seen *Rear Window* again, on its release by CIC video a couple of months ago. I was struck by how true my memories of it had stayed — for the most part — but where my mind had fabricated subtle differences to the story, Hitchcock's genius invariably provided a better alternative than did my subconscious mind. And on seeing it again, I was immediately moved to take up type-writer and dash off a piece for *Movie Maker's* 'My Favourite Film' series. Just after I started, it was with a certain amount of horror that I saw a review of this film in the last issue of the magazine, but I feel it's good enough to return to. I just hope the editor agrees with me. (The assistant editor does! DW).

## DARKER MOTIVES

*Rear Window* is one of those light comedy thrillers that Hitchcock produced with such skill and flair. It is

**Thelma Ritter (right): she turned in an excellent performance as Stella in *Rear Window***

light, comic and thrilling — just as it should be — but as with so much of the Master's work, there is another level on which darker motives are explored, where the face of smiling humanity is bared to reveal the grinning skull beneath. More subtly yet, when overt evil is portrayed, even a murderer is shown to have a streak of humanity. *Rear Window* explores the light and dark side that co-exist in uneasy harmony within all of us.

At the same time as being a work examining the complexities of human nature, *Rear Window* is a technical tour de force. It opens with one, long take, a breathtaking shot, panning and zooming over the flats and windows of a tenement block in New York. This one shot, which seems to last a lifetime, sets the scene for the whole film. As it finally comes to rest on the sleeping face of Jefferies (James Stewart), we are somehow aware that this is going to be a claustrophobic film with a very limited dramatic locale, and in fact, throughout the entire running time, the action never leaves Jefferies' flat or the view from his window.



# REAR WINDOW

## ACTION MAN

Jefferies is a photographer, an action man, the favourite of his editor. He is prepared to take any risk to obtain the photograph he is asked for, which earned him a badly broken leg when hit by a speeding racing car. Flat-bound, he cannot indulge his passion for physical activity, and lives vicariously through watching the lives

of his neighbours through his bedroom window. Since he is the hero of the film we initially presume that we are to sympathise with his penchant for eavesdropping, but as the film progresses, we start to worry about the morality of his constant invasion of other peoples' privacy.

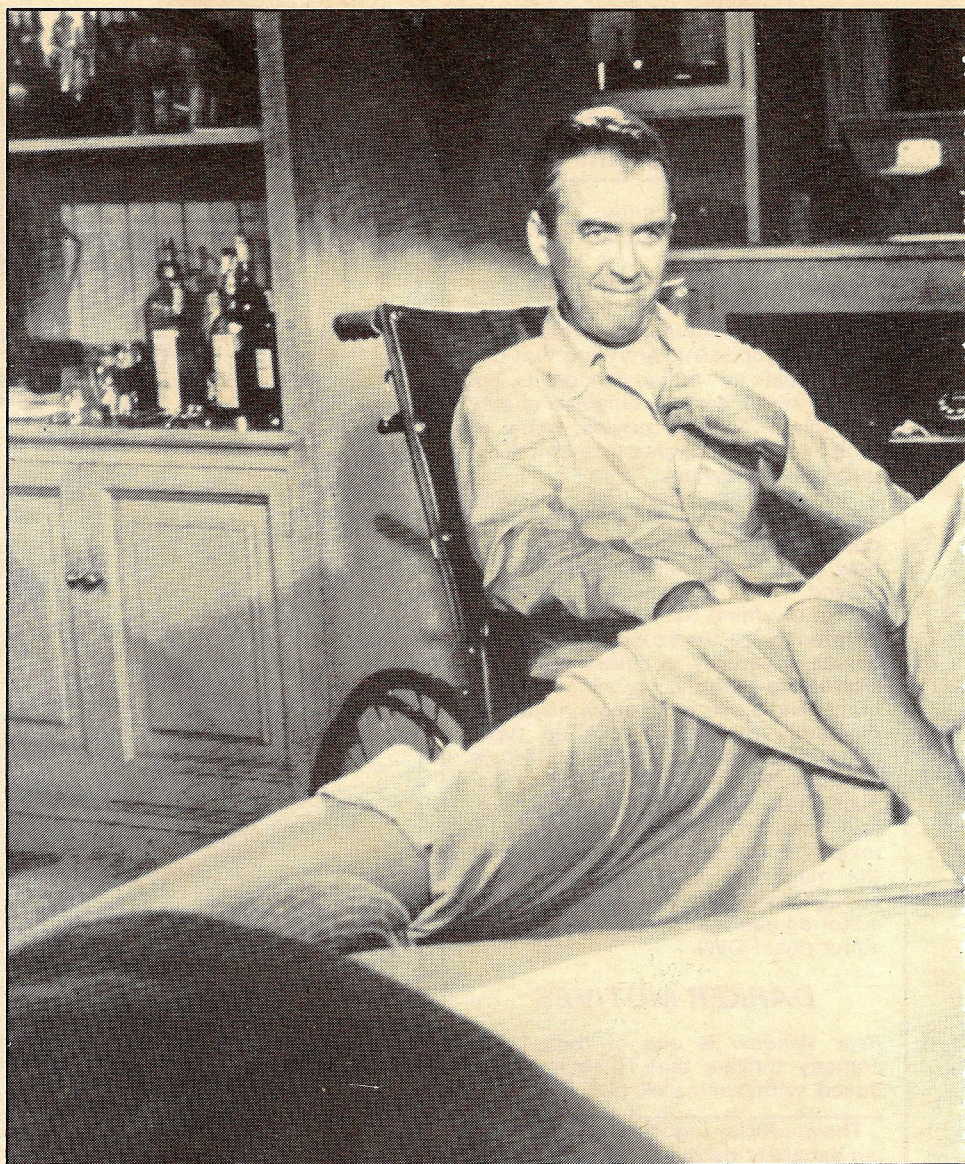


From his rear window, Jefferies can see a complete tableau of seedy living. His neighbours live in a world where the abnormal is normal, where the normal is apparently unobtainable. There is 'Miss Lonelyhearts', a spinster living alone who entertains imaginary men friends. A couple live opposite whose marriage is so sterile that all their love is directed to their small dog, who is lovingly raised and lowered from their third floor flat to the garden in an improvised lift. There are a pair of newlyweds so intent on 'getting to know each other' that they never stray outside the boundaries of their one room. And most importantly, there is an invalid woman, who makes her husband's life misery with her constant nagging. And Jefferies watches all these different lives through the telephoto lens of his camera.

In the essay on *Rear Window* in his excellent book *Hitchcock's Films*, Robin Wood suggests that Jefferies watches these people in the same way as an audience watches a film. His camera is a device that cuts himself off from the lives around him, making him no more than an on-looker. Thanks to his injury he can take no part in the action — and more importantly, he can pick and choose those events that he wants to see, those events that smack of the bizarre, or the unusual. He totally ignores the one couple in the block who apparently lead ordinary, happy and fulfilled lives, and picks out the others in much the same way as a film editor chooses the events that he wants to present to his audience. In this way Hitchcock adds to the complexity of the audience's moral standpoint, by overtly declaring that if it condemns Jefferies for being a voyeur, it has condemned itself on the same grounds.

## SOCIETY GIRL

Jefferies is engaged to the beautiful Lisa (Grace Kelly), a society girl who wants to join him in his work, to go on mission with him to the world's trouble spots. Jefferies cannot envisage this beautiful, flower-like girl having the strength to struggle with him through swamp-land carrying pounds and pounds of kit, nor the courage to stand up to an awkward situation and see it through. Her counter-argument is that he should accept a desk job, and leave his action man image behind. Jefferies sees both possibilities as being equally fraught with boredom, and is beginning to wonder whether his engagement to Lisa should be still seen as a viable concern. His fascination with the seedier activities of his neighbours could be seen as an attempt by him to sort out his future options with Lisa. Will she nag him? Will he have to buy a dog on which to squander his affections, or will her voracious sexuality



The wheelchair-bound Jefferies gives Lisa an ambivalent look in *Rear Window*. Stewart and Kelly at their best

keep him from ever venturing outside again? None of these possibilities strike him as being at all attractive.

His problems are made greater by his nurse Stella (Thelma Ritter) who is very keen on Lisa, and indeed sees her as being too good for him. Both women are anxious to have him settle down, and equally united in disapproving of his snooping. Jefferies however remains adamant in the face of this female onslaught, and continues to pry and plan for a return to activity.

## INTRIGUED

Then one night, the entire situation changes for all of them. While Jefferies is half asleep, he hears a scream from one of the apartments opposite. He is intrigued, but thinking

no more of it, goes back to sleep in his accustomed position by the window. While he sleeps, we see the husband of the invalid leaving with a woman, and the next morning Jefferies realises that something in the flat has undergone a change. Curtains remain closed where they were usually open, and he gradually becomes convinced that the wife is no longer in her bed. When he sees, the following night, the husband leaving his flat and returning several times with a succession of suitcases, he becomes gradually convinced that he has killed his wife, dismembered her, and is now distributing the various parts of her corpse around the town.

We however cannot be so sure. We have seen the one piece of action in the whole film that Jefferies does not see — nominally, the man leaving the flat with a woman. So while a great





deal of evidence amounts to suggest the man's guilt, we can never be positive that he is a murderer, and in fact have to worry lest Jefferies is not persecuting a caring husband.

### SUSPICIONS

When he first voices his suspicions to Lisa and Stella, they dismiss his suggestions, believing that they are all the product of a feverish imagination. However as the evidence mounts they become convinced, and Jefferies calls in a policeman friend of his to investigate the problem. All his results are negative, and he discovers that the 'murderer' has sent his wife away for the sake of her health.

By this time however, both Stella and Lisa are convinced of his guilt, and when the much-loved dog is found poisoned, things begin to look even more suspicious. On finding the dead dog, the bereaved woman cries out to the tenement as a whole 'Was it because he liked you?'. In misinterpreting the reason for the killing, she gets to an even greater truth about the nature of the neighbourhood — a

microcosm of a world in which no-one wants the ties of affection, where selfish lifestyles are maintained through the preservation of isolation. Jefferies' worry about the future of his relationship with Lisa is thus illustrated through the death of a dog, an unlikely illustration, but one which is typical of Hitchcock at his best.

Jefferies, Lisa and Stella believe that the dog was killed because he found something buried in the garden, and when it is noticed that some flowers in a bed have been moved — through comparison with a 'snooping' photograph taken some time earlier — the two women volunteer to investigate. While the murderer, whose name is found to be Thorvald, is out, they go down and find nothing, but Lisa, in an attempt to impress Jefferies of her suitability of being his assistant in dangerous situations, decides to go up into Thorvald's flat. He returns while she is there, but she has already found his wife's wedding ring, something which she surely would have taken with her had she really gone away. Jefferies, watching all this, calls the police, and before Thorvald can take action, Lisa is arrested for burglary.

### DAZZLING

However, Thorvald has realised that he is under suspicion, and sees Jefferies watching from over the courtyard. He barges into his flat, and although Jefferies tries to keep him at bay by dazzling him with flashbulbs, he manages to push him out of the very window from which he has been spying. The action of using his camera as a defensive weapon is, as Wood points out, heavily symbolic. The camera is Jefferies' means of keeping the world outside, but when he really needs it to do something positive for him, it doesn't work. He still falls from the window.

As he hits the ground, the police, convinced by Lisa of Thorvald's guilt, appear. Thorvald is arrested, and the last we see of Jefferies is him sitting, happily united with Lisa, with his back symbolically to the window — and his second leg in plaster. He has learned a great deal — that he doesn't need to be active to find excitement and stimulation, that Lisa is courageous and resourceful — and that fretting about a situation that can't be changed doesn't help.

### SUSPECT

The audience is left with a great deal more to think about than either of the central characters however. We recognise the actions of both of them as being suspect. A murderer has been brought to justice, but only through spying and trespass. Both of them were motivated by selfish factors — Jefferies wanted something to do to escape boredom while he was convalescent, and Lisa wanted to impress Jefferies. Neither of them really

cared whether the man was guilty or not, and neither of them felt the slightest sympathy for the dead woman. The neighbourhood would remain the same hotbed of peculiarities — in spite of our seeing a series of 'happy endings' for the majority of the people — but this film leaves us with an extreme awareness that the end of the film does not mean the end of the characters' lives. How long will it be before Lisa and Jefferies rediscover that they are basically incompatible, or 'Miss Lonelyhearts' is as let down in her new relationship with a young man as she doubtless has been in the past? We'll never know, but we must worry...

### MAJESTIC

There is a lobby these days, growing in volume all the time, to the effect that Hitchcock was the greatest technical film maker the Cinema has ever seen. There can be no doubt that he was at least *one* of the greatest. He did have lapses along the way, producing one or two very poor films — *Torn Curtain* for example. But when he achieved his heights, he was utterly majestic. I hope that I have shown here how much more than a mere 'technician' he was. Film makers everywhere find characterisation the most difficult element of movie making. How many times have you seen a film in which the script has been apparently brilliant, until you've thought to yourself 'Hang on a minute. Do people really say or do that sort of thing?'

*Rear Window* has more than an outstanding script. (The script has to be particularly good in this film where so little action takes place, where so much happens in such a small locale.) Hitchcock himself said that a film has to be more than 'pictures of people talking', and in this film he set himself an extremely difficult task — that of making a script-based film a visual experience as well. Nonetheless he passed his test with flying colours, and achieved his success not just with the use of outstanding camerawork, but also the use of symbolism. And I feel that this is where *Rear Window* is very much a 'film maker's film'. We all work with limited budgets. There are effects we can't afford, and we never want to spell out every nuance we want in words alone. Therefore it is worth sitting back and asking yourself, as Hitchcock doubtless did himself, 'What does this character really want?' And once you know that, you can work out a way of expressing his desire, whether it be in terms of action, script or even camera angle. Hitchcock knew exactly what Jefferies and Lisa wanted from life, and was therefore able to characterise them precisely. And since real people never truly say what they want, he made cameras, actions, expressions and events speak for them. And it is this very reluctance to spell things out in black and white which makes *Rear Window* the outstanding film it is. ■